

**Sovereigns in the Marketplace: Consumer Groups and
Citizenship (without Nations?) in the European Union**
**Les souverains au marché. Les groupes de consommateurs et la
citoyenneté (sans État ?) dans l'Union européenne**
**Souveräne Marktteilnehmer: Verbrauchergruppen und
Staatbürgerschaft (ohne Staat?) in der Europäischen Union**

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Résumé de l'article

L'élargissement de l'Europe et la mondialisation modifient profondément le consumérisme européen. Dans ce contexte nouveau, les conditions subjectives, locales et nationales pour défendre les consommateurs au niveau social et politique connaissent des mutations importantes. Je vais recourir à certains discours et publications sur les organismes génétiquement modifiés pour suggérer que ce que les consommateurs gagnent en termes d'influence, d'une part, à travers la création d'agences internationales, d'ONG et par l'important militantisme sur Internet, ils le perdent peut-être, d'autre part, dans le sens d'une diminution de possibilités pour responsabiliser leurs gouvernements locaux. Plus encore, les moyens grâce auxquels on crée des consommateurs « européens » - probablement une « classe objet », pour le dire dans les termes de Pierre Bourdieu - ne témoignent pas seulement d'une érosion de la souveraineté nationale et de sa crise, mais produisent peut-être en même temps une espèce de « récit de la consolation » au regard de l'échec de la démocratie.

Sovereigns in the Marketplace: Consumer Groups and Citizenship (without Nations?) in the European Union

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1 Introduction

In the summer of 2006, the French consumer group *Que Choisir* displayed a simple cause and effect relationship with the phrase “You consume, we defend you” emblazoned across its webpage, suggesting that gullible consumers should expect to be assailed by rapacious entities.¹ These inferred entities are of course, European and U.S. businesses which are presumably using the opening of European nation-state borders to cheat consumers, making consumption a risky business.

There is nothing at all new about debates over consumption and its risks in France. Consumer cooperatives were founded in the late nineteenth century to protect proletarian consumers from capitalist producers and give adherents to the socialist ethos political leverage. After World War Two, consumer groups protected what Victoria de Grazia calls “the European vision of the social citizen” from “the American notion of the sovereign consumer”.² Now, it appears that a globalizing market and its tenets (*also known as*, Anglo-Saxon neo-liberalism hidden behind the dictates of Brussels) are to blame for consumer ills. Or at least, this is the warning that *Que Choisir* imparts to its adherents through the medium of the Internet.

¹ <http://www.quechoisir.org/>: “Vous consommez, nous vous défendons”.

² Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005, p. 342. There is extensive scholarship on this issue, but see in particular Martin Daunt/Matthew Hilton, *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, Oxford: Berg, 2001, pp. 1-5; Susan Strasser/Charles McGovern/Matthias Judd (eds.), *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Peter Jackson/Michelle Lower/Daniel Miller/Frank Mort (eds.), *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices, Spaces*, New York: Berg, 2000; Gunnar Trumbull, *Consumer Capitalism: Politics, Product Markets, and Firm Strategy in France and Germany*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

Yet *Que Choisir* may simply be begging a question on many lips. Who is now sovereign over the regulation of consumer issues in a Europe with open borders? As the 2005 debates in France and the Netherlands over the ratification of the EU constitutional referendums attested, some believe the European Union is a convenient way of ushering in an intrusive neo-liberal economic ideology to the detriment of the sovereign power of nation-states and their citizens.³ It is possible, and indeed likely, that *Que Choisir*'s message merely reflects the current malaise in France that the government will not protect consumers from predatory lending or any other real or imagined consumer ills; or perhaps *Que Choisir* takes advantage of the perceived fear among French shoppers (and voters) that they are indeed being subjected to neo-liberal, Anglo-Saxon economic ideology, the very reason (along with Polish plumbers) why they rejected the draft Constitution.⁴ Yet, the question of to what extent the EU and its institutions hide unwelcome economic changes need not concern us here.

My objective is to explore the current lack of clarity about exactly *where* sovereignty resides in settling consumer disputes in the integrating EU, and how this concern is effecting changes in the social relations of consumption — in effect challenging formerly more resilient ties between citizenship and consumption in some Western European member nations, and provoking the development of EU-sponsored “governmentality” mechanisms concerning consumer issues in the East, neither of which are necessarily unproblematic or altogether positive developments.

A new type of pan-European consumer is both developing and being invoked in conjunction with the enlargement of the EU and the opening of its borders to free trade — a citizen without a country. Through a short survey of the “governmentality” language used recently on some European consumer advocacy websites, I suggest that what consumers

³ On neo-liberalism, see *inter alia* David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁴ Anyone who has watched the American Fox News will recognize this type of media stunt which appeals to the most base of fears to garner attention. In Heejo Keum/Narayan Devanathan/Sameer Deshpande/Michelle Nelson/Dhavan V. Shah, “The citizen-consumer: Media effects at the intersection of consumer and civic culture”, *Political Communication* (21), p. 372, the authors claim that media “play a role in consumer socialization by providing knowledge and skills regarding how and what to consume, creating material expectations and values.” In this case, the medium plays a distinctly *negative* role.

may be gaining in active agency through the creation of supranational agencies and NGOs and the proliferation of Internet activism, they may be losing in the accountability of their local governments.⁵ In brief, there is a realignment of forces in regulating consumers' issues with supranational organizations stepping in to regulate consumer protection, whereas the nation-state appears to have voluntarily ceded some of its sovereignty in this realm.

2 European Consumer Groups: from National Sovereignty to Governmentality

International relations theorist Jonathan Joseph has argued that neo-liberalism is not merely an economic ideology, but one with extensive social and political functions.

“The *ideology* of neo-liberalism (and I use ideology in a pejorative sense. . .) is that it opposes itself to the role of the state, that it stands against forms of regulation and that it is an economic process distinct from social and political affairs. I propose to use a different framework to analyse neo-liberalism — the governmentality approach of Foucault. Seeing neo-liberalism through the governmentality lens gives quite a different impression. It is proposed here that neo-liberalism should be seen as a form of social regulation, a set of arguments about social and personal conduct, something that rather than acting against state power and sovereignty, reinforces and rearticulates them.”⁶

I concur with Joseph that “governmentality” produces mechanisms, even down to the micro-level of individual conduct, which can buttress state sovereignty. However, in the case of European consumer advocacy groups, for whom the promise of emancipatory potential is invoked through the appeal to “civil society,” they appear to be dislocated from the actual process of political and social change, or even basic regulatory processes. New

⁵ J. D. Faubion (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Power*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001, p. 220: Governmentality refers to “[t]he ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security.”

⁶ Jonathan Joseph, “Neo-liberalism, Governmentality, and Social Regulation,” web document prepared for the “Sovereignty and its Discontents” April 2007 workshop in Turin, Italy, p. 2, cited by permission of the author: “Neo-liberalism has come to be associated with the idea of free market capitalism, deregulation, and the rolling back of the state [...] it might be argued that recently neo-liberal approaches are being reined in or that there has been a shift to the notion of good governance.”

distinctly “European” consumers are being invoked and codified, but their link back to an actual sovereign with real, substantiated power, either at the national or supranational level, is murky at best.

Who invokes these consumers by offering them advice and protection? In large measure, the new European consumer is appearing on the websites of some forty member groups of the *Bureau européen des consommateurs* (BEUC, or *European Consumer’s Organisation*). The BEUC is a Brussels-based federation of 40 independent national consumer organisations from the EU, accession and EEA countries. The majority of its funding, including staff salaries, comes from its 40 member units. As a civil society organization, the BEUC also receives some framework funding from the European Commission. In fact, the BEUC lobbies the EU Commission and Parliament extensively, helping European voluntary consumer organizations voice concerns at World Trade Organization and other global levels. Run out of a small office above a strip mall in Brussels, the BEUC’s “job is to try to influence, in the consumer interest, the development of EU policy and to *promote and defend* the interests of all European consumers.”⁷

BEUC member groups’ goals are mundane and wide in range, from protecting children against American forms of advertising and obesity to cell phone users against roaming charges.⁸ For the most part, their missions are defined as global rather than national in character. They all participate in global movements such as the *Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue* and *Consumers International*.⁹ There are few to no markers of national identity on their websites, with the obvious exception of language. Secular idealization of concepts related to the nation-state rarely appears, other than in the case of the French *Que Choisir*, a shadowy outline of France the (once-?) sovereign territory. From a cultural point of view, the BEUC member groups bear some resemblance to what Benedict Anderson first called “sacred language” groups in his seminal work on the cultural attrib-

⁷ <http://www.beuc.org/Content/Default.asp?PageID=149> (the italics are mine).

⁸ For the purposes of this study, I include evidence from only five of the forty member group websites in great detail. These five were chosen based upon language accessibility (French, Spanish, English).

⁹ <http://www.tacd.org/>. As its name suggests, the TACD is a “forum of 65 EU and US consumer organizations which develops and agrees joint consumer policy recommendations to the US government and European Union to promote the consumer interest in EU and US policy making.”
<http://www.consumersinternational.org/>. Consumers International represents 230 groups in 113 countries.

utes of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*.¹⁰ These consumers organizations are unelected representatives, giving tutelage on the right way to “live life” within an integrated Europe where transparency has been troubled, yet they do not *formally represent* anyone in the strict political sense.

For example, the Belgian *Test Achats*, the first European consumer group designed primarily with the notion of product testing in mind, has moved from the BIC pens it studied in its founding year 1957 to multimedia PCs and medications today. *Tests Achats* has advised “millions of consumers, in Belgium and now in Europe,” thereby turning scrutiny from the products of its easily detested neighbor France to producers around the globe. *Tests Achats* aligns itself with other groups which it describes as “Mediterranean” (i. e. Spanish and French consumer organizations), and claims to have “*evolved* from a great consumers group to become a *European* group.”¹¹ The Madrid-based OCU (*Organizacion de Consumidores y Usuarios*) focuses on issues of public health and weight management to quality of batteries. The OCU is also allied with other “Mediterranean” groups, particularly the membership of Euroconsumers — made up of Belgian, French, Italian, Luxembourgish and Portuguese adherents.¹²

The “history” section of the French *Consommation, Logement et Cadre de Vie* (CLCV) provides readers with a lesson on contemporary political economics. The CLCV recognizes that the era of the State with a capital “S” is over, and claims that action cam-

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition, London: Verso, 1991, pp. 9-19. I refer to the section in which Anderson expounds upon nation-building as a multifaceted process which depends upon the creation of press culture, bureaucratic entities and correspondingly privileged knowledge groups. These latter bear a certain resemblance to today’s European Commissioners and their Directorates General and EU civil society organizations.

¹¹ <http://www.test-achats.be/map/show/16522/src/235841.htm> (my italics). “L’asbl Test-Achats a été fondée en 1957 par des bénévoles, sur l’exemple de précurseurs britanniques et américains. La base de cette diffusion d’informations était nouvelle pour tout le monde: les tests comparatifs de produits. Pour la première fois, dans notre pays, une organisation osait comparer les qualités et les défauts de produits, en allant jusqu’à conseiller ou déconseiller un produit par rapport à un autre. Au fil des décennies, Test-Achats a évolué pour devenir une grande organisation de consommateurs, qui s’est élargie jusqu’à devenir un groupe européen.”

¹² <http://www.ocu.org/>. There is a strong divide between Nordic and Mediterranean adherents to the BEUC, with the Eastern European groups fitting into yet another category. This regional stratification will be covered elsewhere.

paigns at the national level are no longer efficacious. In short, governance has replaced government.¹³

Que Choisir was founded in '51 and is thus the oldest post-WW II European consumer group. It is the only group among the five considered here which uses explicitly politicized language, that of the French nation-state-republicanism. Its website refers to a constitution and elections by a General Assembly which then under authority of its president, places a strategic political agenda in place on an annual basis. UFC *Que Choisir* invokes the abstract principles and notions of government equated with nation-states (*indépendance, démocratie et solidarité*). This is remarkable by comparison with the other websites featured here, because none of them refer to an established parliamentary or democratic process or to the "nation" as such.

In fact, the promise of activism made by supranational consumer NGOs may be part of a consolation narrative compensating for the current weakness of some Western European nation-states to retain sovereignty over realms in which they once held greater power. In the Eastern accession countries, consumer groups point attention to the painfully slow process of developing civil society, let alone functional critical organizations. A most pessimistic report on this slow progress appears on the *Consumers International* white paper on Central and Eastern Europe, which laments that "the problems of managing the transition to a market economy have become no easier with the passage of time."¹⁴

The Hungarian consumers group, or the *National Association for Consumer Protection*, was founded in 1982 but has operated in association form since, unsurprisingly, Oc-

¹³ <http://www.clcv.org/index.php?v=detail&a=info&id=46>: "L'Etat a de moins en moins les moyens financiers de la politique qu'il veut mettre en oeuvre. Le mot 'gouvernement' qui était utilisé lorsque l'Etat décidait et finançait est remplacé par le mot 'gouvernance.' Ce n'est pas un synonyme, mais une autre conception de la gestion de la société qui se développe [. . .]."

¹⁴ Christine Knights' report on the current PHARE Consumer Institutions and Consumer Policy Program II (CICPP II, 1998-2000) in her role as Adviser to the Office for Developed and Transition Economies for Consumers International can be viewed at:

http://www.consumersinternational.org/Shared_ASP_Files/UploadedFiles/831A4189-BF9A-4D22-B473-795B5F442FDC_Doc39.pdf. It is somewhat discouraging to note that the many complaints and concerns about naïve consumers and their travails which developed in Eastern Germany after the reunification of Germany in 1989 seem to be repeating themselves without any remedy in the new Eastern European contexts. See Anne-Laure Köhne, "Empowering the consumer movement in central and eastern Europe: Experiences of a United Germany", *Journal of Consumer Policy* 14 (1991), no. 2, pp. 229-237.

tober of 1989. Here the websites most clearly display governmentality, as the NACP claims its foremost goal is to “shape and strengthen conscious consumer behavior.”¹⁵ Because of the recent accession of many Eastern European countries to the EU, consumers are simply green, and not in the pro-environmental sense.¹⁶ The Hungarian consumer group website states that sovereignty over consumer issues in Hungary cannot be trusted to either the market or the authorities, hence the need for NGO activism.

This was trenchantly illustrated in another May 1, 2004 accession country, the Czech Republic. In 2005 two filmmakers got a government grant and used it to stage the fake opening of a hypermarket named “Ceski Sen” (also the name of the film). Three thousand Prague residents arrived on the opening day of the “Czech Dream” big box store to a façade in an open field. Upon being victimized by the brilliant advertising campaign the filmmakers had devised at their expense, many of these “Dream” consumers simply shrugged their shoulders and remarked that they might have known not to trust campaigns. The message of the film was that Czech consumers could be too easily duped by the rhetoric of cheap consumer goods when, given their past experience as subjugates of the Soviets, they should have known better.

The May 1, 2004 Eastern European accession countries walked before they crawled, in some cases skipping the liberal phase of consumer activism because of Soviet socialism. And the ideology of neo-liberalism is a recent import. Thus, the primary function of that neo-liberalism to regulate social conduct in the Foucauldian sense can be seen directing consumer activism in the new accession countries.¹⁷ In this context we see what Jonathan Joseph calls the “responsibilisation and individualisation of conduct” within

¹⁵ <http://www.ofe.hu/szerv/ae1.htm> (Hungary);

<http://www.zps-zveza.si/ZPSstrani/zpsang.nsf/GlavniFrame?OpenFrameSet&DelSpleta=ZPSFrameset?OpenFrameSet&Vsebina=0/8FCF6E00A3850B4AC1256C5700376718?OpenDocument&> (Slovenia).

¹⁶ I say this despite the one exception, the Slovenian Consumers Association pilot project “the Green Consumer” which took place between 1993 and 1995.

¹⁷ Another telling example of how the Eastern groups subscribe to a more neo-liberal economic ideology is their use of English as *lingua franca* on websites. Their Western European counterparts stick to national languages and do not provide English translations.

neo-liberalism, as civil society groups are developing and suggesting personal conduct without accountability to strong national democracies.¹⁸

Whether in the West or East, four out of five of these consumer groups present themselves as local chapters of a more united force of non-governmental organizations, and seem to have caught the governance wave. Here it is useful to examine briefly the historical continuities, or rather the lack thereof, with prior consumer movements. Contemporary consumer movements appeal to international solidarity in the same fashion that certain segments of the women's suffrage and socialist workers' movements of the 1880's and 90's did; unlike these movements however, they do advocate operating primarily at the international level since the latter has been determined as the more efficacious action campaign.

Consumer cooperative movements of the late nineteenth century developed within the context of the growing empire and development of nation-state — and workers' politics fit within the ideology of the nation-state. When speaking to an assembly of French consumer cooperatives at the Parisian World's Fair of 1889, Charles Gide promoted a third way between conservative paternalism and socialism, both well within the poles of French Third Republican politics. And to make his point Gide appropriated the revolutionary discourse of the Abbé Sièyes' 1789 pamphlet vaunting the Third Estate: "What is the consumer? Nothing. What should he be? Everything." Political wrangling over consumer issues took place between the moderate and socialist factions of French republicanism.¹⁹

Furthermore, fashioning an acceptable republican consumer had explicit gender dimensions. In the 1880's enormous tension existed between the tenets of republican civic-mindedness and the free market, in which, because of domestic sphere ideology, bourgeois women were seen as targets of consumption gone astray. In response, market pro-

¹⁸ Joseph, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁹ Ellen Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France: the Politics of Consumption, 1834-1930*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 85-87. Furlough's is the seminal work on this topic for France. See also Ellen Furlough/Carl Strikwerda (eds.), *Consumers against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999, for an excellent broader survey of the European examples.

professionals and advertisers developed new models of female consumption which vaunted aesthetically-informed purchasing as conforming to Republican ideals.²⁰

Today's European consumer groups do not appeal to such abstract political ideals, and hence appear stripped of political connection and of particular notions of European citizenship and democracy. Instead, they display either a renunciation of the nation-state and its sovereignty or an appeal to non-sovereign forms of politics (governance). As political theorist David Chandler has noted, since the end of the Cold War the new global civil society of transnational NGOs is premised on the rejection of national-level politics.²¹ This is the most significant change in the framing of consumer issues in this so-called post-Westphalian system, in which state sovereignty is viewed as a totalitarian or regressive system that impedes global governance and the protection of certain human rights. The European Union manages to draw authority from this implicit critique of sovereignty, a general democratic deficit within many of its member institutions, and disenchantment with politics at national level more generally. Here a particular discourse of sovereignty if not sovereignty itself is being rejected.

3 On the Political Potential of European Consumers

Thus, we might claim globally that the "European" consumer is merely a fictitious citizen created through the discourse and institutions of postmodern government, in particular the Directorates General of the European Union. There are elements of this global claim which ring true, because, after all, consumption can be used as an effective agent to provoke group identities. The president of the BEUC claimed in early 2005 that "both the Parliament and the Commission need subjects which bring them closer to people and

²⁰ Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Marketplace: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. See also Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

²¹ Cited in Ryan David Griffith's "Interview of Alex Gourevitch", *European Studies Newsletter* 35 (June 2006), p. 7. See also David Chandler, *Constructing Global Civil Society: Morality and Power in International Relations*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004.

consumer issues are such subjects.”²² Does the BEUC, affiliated with the Parliament and Commission, promote and prompt a fictitious European consumer, in effect, enforcing its own sovereignty over European consumers’ issues by bypassing or nullifying the authority of national governments? Is this new European consumer thus a figment of the European Union’s imagination, a *classe-objet* in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense of the term, created by Brussels to condone its existence?²³

Partly, but not entirely. It’s not as if the Brussels BEUC threw a governmentality party and no one came. Europeans are actively interested in these consumer groups. The social model of consumerism that developed in Europe after World War II is waning in the globalizing world economy. This social model was predicated upon the expectation that national governments could and would protect and support a basic minimal lifestyle for all citizens. As the welfare state comes under increasing pressure from globalization, stagnant population growth, and aging populations whose weight is more than the current social welfare and pension structures can bear, consumers are turning to agencies which they believe might protect their way of life. If governments are unresponsive, consumers turn to NGO activism. If sovereign nations once accepted the responsibility of providing a consistent standard of living, it is no longer clear that they can be counted on within the framework of the EU to enforce this “right”. Thus, consumer groups appeal to agency outside the bounds of traditional political sovereignty, whether juridical or material/actual.

There are signs that these consumers may have ideas of their own about what to make of a developing post-nation state consumer consciousness. Eastern European students are being taught what mass communications experts call “lifestyle” politics, including socially conscious consumption, environmental consumption, and voluntary sim-

²² Dr. Rasmus Kjeldahl, President of the BEUC and Director of Denmark’s Forbrugerrådet, interviewed on Euractiv in February of 2005: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/food/beuc-president-industry-gained-influence/article-135166>

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984, and *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge: Polity, 1990. I also disagree here with Jürgen Habermas’s sweeping assertion that the encouragement of consumerism by the state weakens the “genuine” functioning of the public sphere as moral critic. See *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Oxford: Polity, 1992.

plicity (all of which, by the way, bear resemblance to the austerity condoned by turn of the century consumer cooperatives, which eschewed the advertising, glitz and aura of modern goods).²⁴ In a fascinating article on young purchasers in the developed West, Dietlind Stolle, Marc Hooghe, and Michelle Micheletti trace the growth of politicized purchasing among some Western European students. They call this youth a “citizen-consumer” and claim she “choose[s] products for other-oriented reasons that may concern political, social, and ethical issues which she finds important to apply consistently in all life spheres.”²⁵ According to the authors, “political consumerism is practiced by those who do not expect national institutions to fix their problems, but who are more likely than others to believe the individualized actions may lead to the solution of political grievances.”²⁶

European consumers are also “voting with their feet,” as the colloquial expression goes. Walmart’s aggressive expansion into a reunited Germany failed dismally. In August of 2006 it sold its entire German operation back to a German corporation. Tactical errors included not hiring German-speaking managers and failing to understand the cultural predilections of German consumers, who according to extensive research which Walmart ignored, prefer ferreting out bargains to being force fed bargains by a big-box store.²⁷

²⁴ See Christine Knights’ abbreviated report on the current PHARE Consumer Institutions and Consumer Policy Program II (CICPP II (1998-2000) at: <http://www.norden.org/NICEMail/issues/thirteen/several.htm>

²⁵ Dietlind Stolle/Marc Hooghe/Michelle Micheletti, “Politics in the Supermarket: Political Consumerism as a Form of Political Participation”, *International Political Science Review* 26 (2005), pp. 245-269. Although these definitions suggest that any consumption act could be a political act, Stolle et al. do not insinuate that any purchasing act is political and clearly demarcate the *citizen-consumer* “who chooses products for other-oriented reasons that may concern political, social, and ethical issues which she finds important to apply consistently in all life spheres”, from the *consumer-citizen* whose “self-interest [may merely] spill over into political engagement” (p. 225, emphasis in original). Stolle/Hooghe/Micheletti argue that citizen-consumers do not view consumption as a replacement for traditional forms of civic participation; rather it supplements their voting and volunteer behaviors, providing another realm for political expression.

²⁶ Michelle Micheletti in *Politics, Products and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present* (2002); Michele Micheletti/Dietlind Stolle, “The Market as an Arena for Transnational Politics” (http://ya.ssrc.org/transnational/Micheletti_Stolle/); Peter Jackson, “Consumption and Identity: the Cultural Politics of Shopping”, *European Planning Studies* 7 (1999).

²⁷ “Walmart Sells its 85 German Stores”, *Financial Times*, July 24, 2006. This failure contrasts sharply, and tellingly I think, with the expansion of the U.S.-owned Woolworth’s chain into Germany under the Weimar Republic. Eighty-two 25- and 50-pfennig stores opened by 1932, fourteen of which were in Berlin. Woolworth’s utilized German-speaking local management and the stores were forcibly closed by the Na-

If we began debating to what extent these gestures can be considered “truly” politicized by comparing them to the acts of nineteenth-century consumer cooperatives, we would be falling victim to a limited conception of politics.²⁸ Perhaps this is the crux of the challenge in framing contemporary consumer issues — that the definition of what can be considered “political” is transforming enormously in the globalizing and mediatized world. Additionally, there is a notable shift recently in the treatment of some consumer issues, especially in the transatlantic context — a shift from avowal to rejection, or to a politics of negativity. Consumer issues might be said to be framed not as the right to achieve certain types of social emulation as in the past, but as a rejection of an imperial power’s offerings — the U.S. product and its implicit message. In the fifties the French teenager proclaimed his membership in the consumer-citizen world of easily accessible American consumer goods by grabbing a Coke and a Marlboro; perhaps the new European citizen-consumer will renounce all American products including GMO laden corn chips to prove his identity.²⁹

tional Socialists in 1939. When the Nazis closed such foreign companies by banning the re-export of profits, the value of the Woolworth’s endeavor was four times the original investment. See de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, pp. 166-168.

²⁸ Other than Habermas, I have failed to find a European equivalent of the “Putnam thesis” which postulates that media and consumption divorce individuals from a former “ideal” world of participatory democracy. See R. D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. The most comprehensive recent refutation of the Putnam thesis can be found in Dietlind Stolle/Marc Hooghe, “Inaccurate, Exceptional, One-Sided or Irrelevant? The Debate about the Alleged Decline of Social Capital and Civic Engagement in Western Societies”, *British Journal of Political Science* 35 (2004), pp. 149-167. Keum et al., “The citizen-consumer: Media effects at the intersection of consumer and civic culture”, hypothesize that consumer and civic culture are not in distinct opposition to one another and that instead of reducing civic engagement, media consumption can result in civic behavior despite its tendency to promote consumer values.

²⁹ In historical perspective it is fascinating to see how recurrent debates over “foodstuffs” provide a site upon which to evaluate political agency and politicization. What is discouraging in the present incarnation of the debate is the primacy of industry, science and government, whereas in the recent past foodstuff debates often promoted the political interests of marginalized groups. For example, in her excellent book *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, Maureen Healy demonstrates how the Habsburg Empire failed to react to public outcry about consumer issues. In fact, a strong group mentality (*Gesinnung*) was created among Viennese women during the war, as they participated in food riots due to their belief that Habsburg imperial authority wasn’t fulfilling its mandate — the provision of food for the residents of the Empire. Healy argues that through consumer awareness, women, who until 1914 had little or no political consciousness, came to see themselves as political actors (see chapter 4). See also Nancy Reagan, “Comparing Apples and Oranges: Housewives and the Politics of Consumption in Interwar Germany,” in *Getting and Spending*; Helmut Berghoff, “Enticement and Deprivation: the Regulation of Consumption in Pre-War Nazi Germany,” in Daunt/Hilton; Belinda Davis, “Food Scarcity and the Empowerment of

Globalization might have initiated a rupture with one of the consistent markers of consumerism — social emulation in consumption. In the few years since the U.S. invaded Iraq, headlines read U.S. “foreign policy damaging U.S. economy,” and the companies being hit by this negative European opinion are those who have obviously passed their zenith in Europe — Coca Cola, Eurodisney, etc.³⁰ In fact, becoming a good “European” consumer may mean boycotting goods associated with Anglo-Saxon market imperialism, GMO laden products, for example. Could being “European” begin meaning NOT to shop American?

The current foodstuffs example provoking debate in Europe may be an example in which cultural predilections and decisions help force change in industry, rather than consumer advocacy groups forcing political change through “normal” political channels. In short, the theory of global governance in the European consumers groups does not mesh with the practice, as these forms of governance seem rather weak. European consumer protection agencies cannot offer much more than the appearance of agency — a perfect example of their weakness comes in the failure to affect any change in the status of GMOs and biotechnology.

In a 2005 poll 80 per cent of French respondents were against the introduction of genetically modified crops into active agriculture, and its inclusion in imported goods.³¹ And this particular antipathy to U.S. intrusive economic and scientific technology is rapidly spreading eastward.³² In 2003 the French *faucheurs* felt they had exhausted all juridi-

the Female Consumer in World War I Berlin”, in Victoria de Grazia/Ellen Furlough (eds.), *The Sex of Things. Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

³⁰ In an October 27, 2004 article on the *Earth Policy Institute* website, Lester R. Brown notes that “some of the world’s strongest consumer brands, like Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and Gap, are being hit hard. Coca-Cola sales in Germany dropped 16 percent from the similar period last year [...] Failing attendance at Disney’s theme park outside Paris dropped revenues to where it had to be rescued by its parent company.”

³¹ The sample was 1,000; see:

http://www.60millions-mag.com/page/bases.15_zoom.2_sondages_exclusifs.14_les_agriculteurs_juges_par_les_consommateurs/Item-itm_ccc_admin_20040220180011_180011_Lesagriculteursjugsparles.txt/

³² “Around 76 percent of Polish consumers said they didn’t want to eat any food containing GM ingredients, according to a PBS opinion poll commissioned by Greenpeace. The news follows an earlier study

cal means by which to resist the experimentation in France of GMOs. Claiming that the French government supported private interests to the detriment of the general interest, the collective turned to civil disobedience. Citizens used both politicized consumption, but also older methods reminiscent of those employed by the Luddites, famous in the early industrial revolution for smashing up the spinning machines which devalued their labor. The French invaded fields and pulled up rows of genetically-modified crops (hence, the name “faucheurs”).³³

The BEUC entered into the fray, but too little and too late. It issued a strong statement in January of 2006, just prior to a long-anticipated WTO ruling on GMOs: “The U.S. effort to force GM foods upon unwilling consumers is offensive and misguided. Consumers cannot be forced to buy and eat food they do not want.” This message was reinforced by the U.S. side of the *Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue*, which also concurred that a “WTO ruling in favor of the U.S. will only increase consumer suspicion of GM crops and of a global trading system that subsumes the public interest to the interests of giant biotechnology firms.”³⁴ However, one month after releasing this strong announcement the BEUC retracted its stance, citing an abstract principle which guides the supranational organization of the European Union, the principle of subsidiarity: “We applaud and support the Commission’s statement that ‘every country has the sovereign right to make its own decisions on GMOs in accordance with the values prevailing in its society’.”³⁵

Because the BEUC has no true political agency, it could not help the French. Their own government was unaccountable to the wishes of the majority of its citizens. Therefore, the consumers’ advocacy groups offer an empowerment discourse, but cannot en-

by Russia’s largest public opinion research body, VCIOM, that 95 per cent of Russians aware of GM ingredients said they were either opposed to them or seriously concerned by them.”

<http://www.foodproductiondaily.com/news/ng.asp?n=63874-gm-ingre>.

³³ Ministère de l’Agriculture et de la Pêche (2006), *OGM : consultation du public et programmes de recherche 2006* (Communiqué de presse); C. Perrotin (ed.), *Qu’est-ce que c’est que la Confédération paysanne?* Paris: l’Archipel, 2005, p. 62.

³⁴ Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue Press Release, January 20, 2006 (see: <http://www.tacd.org>).

³⁵ BEUC: the *European Consumer’s Organisation*, Press Release 003-2006, February 8, 2006.

force accountability either at the national or European Union level. Because they no longer have national political ties, they have lost their true critical function.

The enlargement of Europe and globalization are reconfiguring European consumerism. The means by which “European” consumers are being created reflects an erosion of national sovereignty and its crisis. At the same time the European Union and NGOs have become part of a consolation narrative. Leaning as they do on a broad critique of sovereignty as a kind of “alternative” authority, they have no clean and transparent access to power structures on which to ground this more “progressive” form of governance. At least, not yet. We will have to wait until the historical moment when the political consumer, who Ulrich Beck calls the “counter-power of global civil society,” is able to function more forcefully.³⁶

If nationalism informed the creation of the consumer in the late nineteenth century, then today neo-liberalism as an ideology is doing the same job. As mechanisms regulating the individualization of social conduct both function(ed) quite effectively. Nationalism appealed to the nation as sovereign while neo-liberalism appeals to abstract pan-European values as sovereign.

Yet the consumer is left wondering who is sovereign. The coin of that name changed value several times throughout the course of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a royal proclamation finally designating its value at 20 schillings in 1817. Then it was clear who was responsible, and to whom complaints could be addressed — the namesake’s sovereign (King George III). *Que Choisir*’s promise that if “you consume, we defend you” seems some consolation — at least its adherents still have a nation-state, albeit an unresponsive one, on which to ground their appeals.

³⁶ Ulrich Beck, *Power in the Global Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, p. 7.

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Que Choisir

60 Millions de Consommateurs

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Tests Achats

Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue